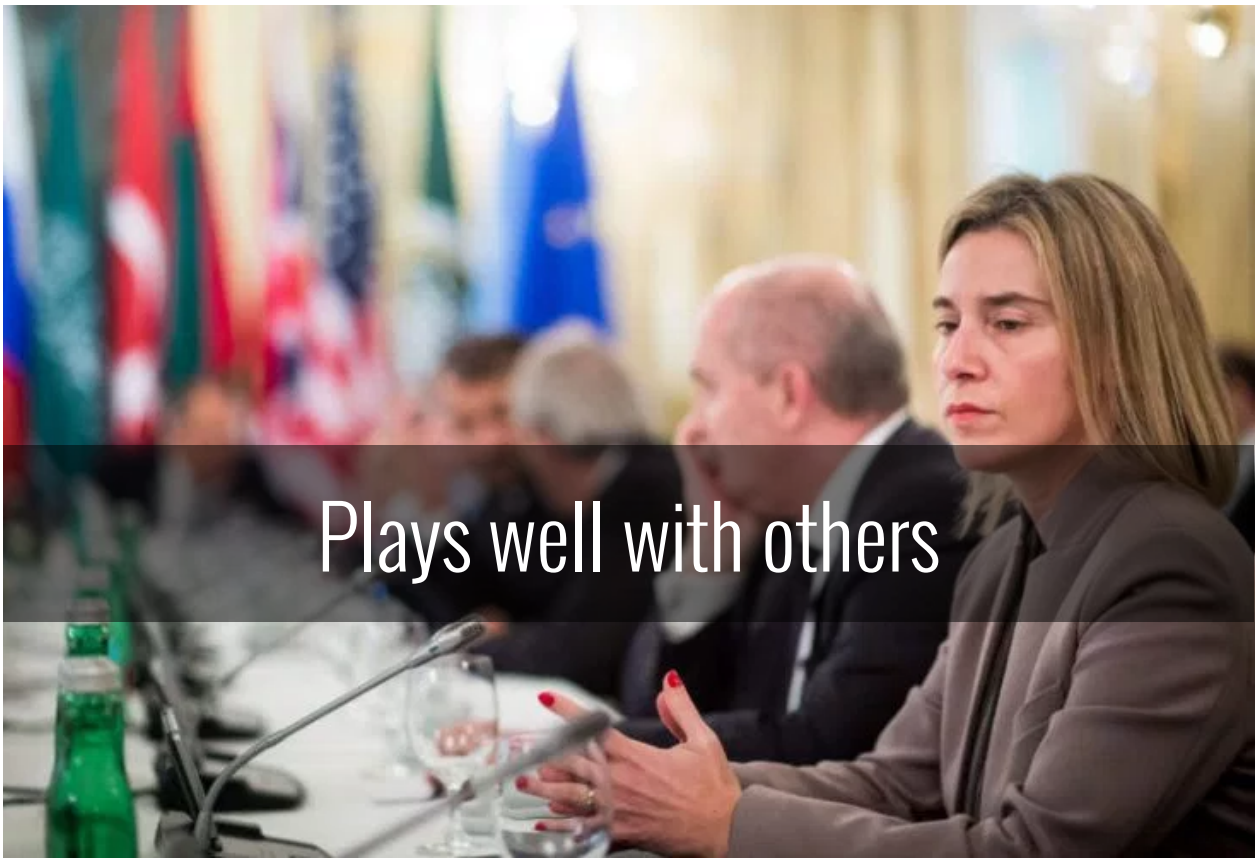
Plays well with others



Dangerous women at the peace table

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Negotiating peace is a difficult business. The dividends proposed by a peace agreement can be plentiful, but as this year's referendum in Colombia demonstrates, a document signed by both sides does not necessarily mean that everyone is on the same page.

The decades-long peace process between the Colombian government and the FARC stands out as one in which women actually took part in negotiations. Not only were women present around the table, but individuals such as Cristina Diaz and Olga Lucia Marin, actively participated and signed peace agreements. Colombia's peace process has also been praised as innovative for its inclusion of a gender sub-commission in the technical negotiations (Herbolzheimer, 2016). This has made a pleasant change from frequent negotiations where the only woman in the room is standing at the back, half-cropped out of any photos, and taking notes, whilst men at the table debate the terms of a political settlement amongst themselves.

These images of peace negotiations without women are accompanied by some sobering figures. According to a 2012 study by the UN, in 31 major peace processes between 1992 and 2011, women made up just 4 per cent of signatories, 2.4 per cent of chief mediators, 3.7 per cent of witnesses and 9 per cent of negotiators. Of the approximately 1400 peace agreements signed worldwide from 1990 to 2016, only 14 were signed by representatives of women's groups. In other words, women's participation in negotiating peace remains disappointingly low.

Whilst each UN Security Council debate on the Women, Peace and Security agenda generates an abundance of comments on women's ability to negotiate sustainable peace, less attention is paid to how women are treated once they get their feet under the table. If we look at a few examples of women who have acted as political negotiators and how they are perceived, clearly not everyone agrees that a woman has something to bring to the discussion. In fact, they are

marked as dangerous via a whole host of euphemisms, which only serve to water down calls for greater, and more meaningful, inclusion.

Women who negotiate political settlements are indeed dangerous in these scenarios, but the risk they pose is not to peace. Rather, their presence at the table is scrutinised, belittled, and challenged precisely because they disrupt this overwhelmingly elite, male space, whilst simultaneously representing members of society who are disproportionately affected by conflict.

Whether talks aim to secure an immediate ceasefire, or to recognise a state decades after armed conflict has ended, women's diplomatic performances are acutely scrutinised. Knowledge and experience suddenly become meaningless when women representatives are publically criticised by male colleagues for disappointing results, in a way that is highly gendered.

When Kosovo politician Jakup Krasniqi publically expressed his dissatisfaction with a Pristina-Belgrade normalization dialogue meeting in April 2016, he did so by blaming the result on the 'weakness' of Kosovo's female delegation, against the Serbian side's 'toughness'. He further claimed he wasn't just referring to the gender of delegates, but that a conciliatory approach to negotiations was in itself a "female" characteristic, and needed to be challenged so as to "defend the interest of the country and the nation".

Krasniqi's statement, and its explicit link between 'female', 'weakness' and 'failure', demonstrates just how women negotiators are perceived as dangerous from a patriarchal worldview. A danger to stability; how can agreements on the terms of peace be reached by women who only experience armed conflict as victims of violence perpetrated by men? Dangerous for the nation, as conciliation in negotiations over a country's status is a weakness that must be defended by a quick-thinking man.

From an alternative perspective, Kosovo's Minister for Dialogue – Edita Tahiri – is a dangerous woman because her presence at that table disrupts this patriarchal understanding of a woman's place in negotiating peace. Despite a long history of representing Kosovo at high-level negotiations, dating back to the Rambouillet conference in 1999, her performance was called into question in such a gendered way so as to attack her diplomatic credentials. Equating failure with femininity not only seeks to discredit women who have overcome barriers to participate, but also to discourage others from assuming the same privilege. It reinforces the notion that, as Cynthia Enloe (2000: 197) puts it,

‘international politics are too complex, too remote and too tough for the feminine mind to understand’.

For women who make it to the peace table, these character attacks can be professional, political, and personal. Anne Itto (2006) reveals that during the Machakos negotiations, women members of the Sudanese People’s Liberation Movement/Army (SPLM/A) delegation were ‘ridiculed and intimidated’ by ‘seasoned politicians’ for raising gender issues in the discussions. Two Members of the European Parliament criticised the EU’s High Representative for foreign-policy, Federica Mogherini – often one of the few women participating in international peace talks on Syria – for crying during a press conference following the Brussels bomb attacks, with one stating that “Tough decisions have to be made, and if you can’t make those tough decisions you’ve got to step aside”.

Reflecting on her experiences as a representative of the Northern Ireland Women’s Coalition (NIWC), Monica McWilliams (2015) asserts that directing ‘abuse at women in leadership positions is a deliberate tactic employed by male politicians across a range of conflict societies…designed to diminish their credibility in public life’. In the Northern Irish context, this abuse included comments from party leaders that “women should leave politics and leadership alone”, and that the NIWC, “must be a cult so they will grow into each other and disappear”. McWilliams was also subjected to personal abuse: ‘graffiti outside her office, instructing her to “get back to the kitchen,” as well as more misogynous, objectionable drawings, including penises painted on posters near her home’ (Kilmurray and McWilliams, 2011).

By having innovatively used the peace talk structure and electoral system to demand seats for their members, the NIWC’s presence was dangerous to the male-dominated status-quo of the negotiations thus-far. Their determined self-inclusion evoked desperate attempts to reassert the dominance of male actors in Northern Ireland’s peace process by undermining women’s capability to offer meaningful contributions, reminding them of their “rightful” place in society, or attempting to threaten them into submission. Anything which would remind dangerous women that, as Doris Mpoumou (2004) recounts of the warring parties’ opposition to women’s inclusion in the Sun City Inter-Congolese Dialogue, ‘war and peace are exclusively the business of men.’

Every woman at the table actively negotiating for peace challenges these patriarchal assumptions. They illustrate that war and peace are not the exclusive business of any one group, but the inclusive concern of everyone affected by conflict. For *this* reason, they deserve to be lauded as dangerous women.

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